



When I was 14 or so, I wrangled an after school job at the corner store, “Christies,” (now understood as “a convenience store,”) - located at the corner of White Bear Avenue and County Road F in White Bear Lake, Minnesota.

Christy, who’s name adorned the storefront in the possessive form, “Christies”, was an amiable codger, a World War 2 vet who’d built his corner store in

suburban Minnesota, intent on making a success of it. I was there to learn the importance of hard work and to earn enough to pay the inflated tuition at Hill High School in East St. Paul.

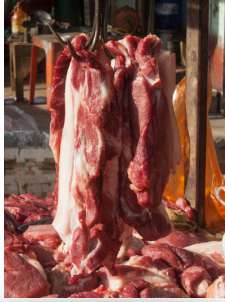
My older brother Don was also an employee of Christies, a Senior at Hill High School by this time (1964) Being the older, wiser, and more trustworthy of the two of us, Don was assigned the job of Cashier. He handled the money, funneling it through an old, mechanical cash register that would ring-out majestically when the Total button was punched.

I was assigned to bagging-when-needed, restocking the milk and beer coolers as necessary. I trimmed heads of lettuce out of the produce cooler before putting them out display, and I stocked shelves when the Wholesaler delivered.



At the rear of Christies was an old-fashioned butcher shop run by two curmudgeonly Polish brothers. When they didn’t wish you to know what they were talking about, which was most of the time, they’d converse in Polish. I considered the guttural language somehow exotic.

I don’t recall their surname precisely, but it was something along the lines of Kowalski. The knife wielding duo would butcher any piece of meat you might wish for. Beef, pork, lamb...whatever your desire, cut precisely the way you asked.



The Kowalski butcher operation included a large walk-in cooler. The massive chiller was always a treat on hot, humid August days. Inside the cooler, various animal carcasses hung silently on large steel hooks, aging until just the right moment. Only the Kowalski brothers knew when that moment was.

I recall the beef halves and quarters, hanging mute, building-up thick layers of bacteria and mold on the carcass surface. This thickening wainscot magically endowed flavor on the meat underneath.

The odor of the encrusted layer was mildly unpleasant, but the beef below grew rich, ever deepening the flavor. So much so that Kowalski Meats was the busiest butcher in our suburban community even as the shop was in the back of a tiny corner grocery. Customers flocked to the butcher shop, swapping small talk with the Kowalski's as the pair carved muscle, sinew and fattiness into exquisite deliciousness.



There came a time when my Catholic faith was challenged by the Kowalski temptation. You see, back in those days Catholics were not allowed to consume meat on Fridays... something to do with Jesus and Good Friday. It was never clear to me, especially since the flesh of fish was okayed for Friday meals.

In fact, this ambiguous edict led to my confounding. I asked my brother what the essential difference was between the flesh of cows/chickens/pigs and that of fish. Whenever I posed the question, my brother would hem and haw, mumbling something about loaves and fishes. It never made any sense to me, but up until this particular moment, I'd always went along so as to get along.

Finally, one Friday evening, after the butcher shop had closed while the grocery portion of the store remained open, I suddenly grew hungry. Christy was gone, having entrusted store operations to my brother and myself so that he could go home and battle his inner demons with brandy. The store closed at 10PM, and Christy would show-up just a moment before closing, half in the bag, taking the cash from the till, while enjoining my brother and myself with drunken chatter.



By 9:30 the urge to eat struck. I wandered back to the butcher shop, Wonder Bread in hand. I took note of a tempting Pimento Loaf. I pilfered 3 or 4 slices. There was an open jar of Plochman's Mustard. I slathered a generous dollop on the awaiting bread, laid on the pimento loaf and topped off my burgeoning sandwich with another slice.



My heart palpated as I considered the moral possibilities of my actions. If I were to bite into the hoagie, I would, in the Catholic Church's estimation, be committing a Mortal Sin, punishable by eternity in an uncomfortable burning Hell. On the other hand, if I did eat the pimento loaf, doing so would relieve the unrelenting, hunger I felt in the pit of my stomach.

Knowing it's easier to ask forgiveness than permission, I bit into the scrumptious grinder. After a few vigorous chews the Wonder Bread Hero was gone. Curiously, my soul did not seem any the worse for wear. A veil before my eyes lifted and I instinctively knew that things were going to work out.

That evening, when Christy showed up, a bit tipsy from the Christian Brothers brandy he kept in a secret place in his garage to avoid his wife's judgmental eyes, he posed his usual question to my brother and myself.

"How'd everything go tonight?" he slurred.

Having experienced something of a spiritual awakening, I replied, "The gift of willingness is the only thing that stands between the quiet desperation of a disingenuous life and the actualization of unexpressed potential."

"Guess I'll see you tomorrow," Christy replied